

Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus
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Did Jesus Observe

As we discussed in the last issue of JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, Torah is not a matter of laws and commandments, but rather instructions from God to man for living a life of blessing and joy. We also explained that Torah consists of two elements—one written and one oral. In this issue we begin a series of articles dealing with Jesus' observance of the Oral Torah.

the Oral Torah?

Blessing

Jesus apparently attached great importance to the Oral Torah (unwritten in his day), and it seems he considered it to be authoritative. When he admonished his disciples to "do and observe everything they [the scribes and Pharisees] command you" (Matthew 23:3), he was referring to the Pharisees' oral traditions and interpretations of the Written Torah. The Written Torah itself could not have been in question, for it was accepted by all sects of Judaism, and Jesus himself said,

Heaven and earth would sooner disappear than one *god* or even one *koiz* from the Torah. (Matthew 5:18)

Many rabbinic statements express similar ideas, such as:

Should all the nations of the world unite to uproot one word of the Torah, they would be unable to do it. (Leviticus Rabbah 19:2)

Evidence of Jesus' Observance

To what extent did Jesus observe the practices of the Oral Torah? Jesus was never charged with breaking any part of it, and although his disciples occasionally were accused of disobeying aspects of the Oral Torah (Luke 6:1-2), only one such accusation was made against Jesus—that he broke the Sabbath by healing the sick (Luke 14:1-4). However, even his Sabbath healings were permitted by rabbinic ruling, as Hebrew University professor and Jerusalem School scholar Shmuel Safrai notes in "Religion in Everyday Life" (*The Jewish People in the First Century*, volume II, page 805).

It may seem that there is a shortage of hard evidence in the New Testament concerning Jesus' religious observance, but one must remember that the New Testament was written by Jews for Jewish readers. The normal Jewish religious practices were so well known and followed both by the writers

and first readers of the New Testament, that it would have been considered superfluous to discuss them. Nonetheless, one is able to gather enough evidence from the Gospels to conclude that Jesus observed the biblical commandments as they were interpreted in the Oral Law.

Blessings for All Occasions

One of the most basic examples of a rabbinic command which Jesus obeyed is in the realm of blessings. The sole scriptural basis for the many blessings that an observant Jew still says daily is Deuteronomy 8:10: ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את יהוה — אלהיך "When you have eaten your fill, thank the LORD your God..." (literally, "And you will eat and you will be full and you will bless the LORD your God"). The rabbis found justification in this verse for saying a blessing before the meal as well as after, and on many other occasions—

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Oral Torah—Blessing

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indeed, on almost every occasion.

The general rule, as delineated in Berachot 35a, was **כל דבר שנחנה טעון ברכה** ("Anything which is enjoyed requires a blessing"). If a man built a house or bought something new he was to say, "Blessed is he who has brought us to this moment." If one saw a place where great miracles had occurred in Israel's history, one was to say, "Blessed is he who in this place performed miracles for our ancestors." In response to a shooting star, lightning, a storm or an earthquake, one was to say, "Blessed is he whose strength fills the universe," and a mountain, hill, lake, river or desert were to prompt, "Blessed is he who fashions the works of creation."

There was a blessing to be said before publicly reading from the Torah, and another at the completion of the reading; a blessing after immersing oneself in a *mik'VE* (ritual immersion bath); a blessing upon seeing a great scholar. There was even a blessing to be said when one urinated: "Blessed is he who formed man in wisdom and created in him numerous orifices and cavities. It is revealed and known before the throne of your glory that if even one of them should be opened or if even one of

them should be obstructed, it would be impossible to exist and stand before you."

One was obligated to bless God for calamity and misfortune as well as for prosperity and good fortune: "For rain and for good news one says, 'Blessed is he who is good and who gives good.' For bad news one says, 'Blessed is he who is the true judge.'"

Jesus' Use of Blessings

There is evidence that Jesus adhered to the rulings of the Oral Torah in his use of various blessings. In conformity with the rabbis' interpretation of Deuteronomy 8:10, Jesus not only recited a blessing after meals, but also said the blessing before meals:

ברוך המוציא לחם מן הארץ ("Blessed is he who brings bread out of the earth"). It is recorded that at the last Passover meal which Jesus ate with his disciples in Jerusalem, Jesus "took bread and blessed and broke and gave to his disciples" (Matthew 26:26).

Since in the Greek text there is no direct object following the verbs "blessed," "broke" and "gave," English translators have felt it necessary to supply the word "it" after each of these, or at least after "broke" and "gave." The English reader therefore receives the impression that Jesus not only divided and distributed the bread, but blessed it as well.

One sees evidence of this misunderstanding in many translations of the New Testament. For instance, King James, Goodspeed, Phillips, Weymouth, Williams, Living Bible and New American Bible, have all added "it" after the verb "blessed." This is simply a misunderstanding of the Hebraic and Jewish connotations of the word "bless."

Saying "Grace"

Before dining with the two disciples from Emmaus, Jesus "blessed, broke and gave," as he did before he fed the five thousand

with five loaves and two fish (In Luke's account, but not in Mark's or Matthew's, the text reads "blessed *them*," but one important Greek manuscript reads "blessed *for them*" at Luke 9:16). Because of the recurring "blessed, broke and gave the bread" in the Gospels, it is a common Christian misunderstanding that Jesus blessed the bread. Consequently, Christians customarily "bless the food" before they eat a meal. No observant Jew would ever make such a mistake: one does not bless anything or anyone except God!

The blessing that was said in Jesus' time before one ate was praise and thanksgiving to God who so wondrously provides food for his children, to him who "brings bread out of the earth." One does not bless the food, nor does one even ask God to bless the food. One blesses God who provides the food.

It is similarly a misunderstanding to assume that Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish by blessing *them*. Jesus, as usual, simply blessed God before beginning the meal. The miracle was not in the blessing, for food did not multiply on other occasions when Jesus offered a blessing before breaking bread.

Better Understanding

This is a good example of how Christians' lack of knowledge of Jewish custom has led to misunderstanding an act of Jesus. In this case it has led to the development of a Christian practice which, though perhaps not harmful, has no foundation whatsoever in Jesus' own practice or teaching.

It is also an example of how a Jewish book can create confusion for later non-Jewish readers. Luke made it clearer for his Greek-speaking readers when he described Paul's practice of "saying grace." A literal translation of Acts 27:35 reads: "And taking bread, he gave thanks to God before all, and breaking, he began to eat."

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The fifth sound in Jesus' Hebrew name יֵשׁוּעַ is "a" as in the word father. Like the tse-RE and the shu-RUK, this sound is a vowel. The symbol used to represent it is called *pa-TAH*. It is indicated by a horizontal line below the letter with which it is sounded. Here it appears below the last letter of יֵשׁוּעַ.

In the system of transliteration used in JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE, the vowel sound *pa-TAH* is represented by the letter "a."

Origin of 'A-yin

The final sound one hears in the name ye-SHU-a^c is guttural. It is produced by constricting the lower throat muscles and retracting the tongue root—very difficult for English-speakers.

This sound is represented by ע ('A-yin), the sixteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. 'A-yin is also the Hebrew word for "eye"—easy to remember since it sounds like the English word "eye." ע got its name from the Hebrew word for "eye" because of the pictograph upon which it was based. In biblical times, the letter was written as a circle, the shape of an eye.

Since it is not a sound that occurs in English, in our system of transliteration we indicate it with the symbol generally used by linguists: ^c, an elevated half-circle open to the right.

Inevitable Exception

We stated in Lesson Two that a Hebrew vowel is pronounced after the letter that carries its sign. No language is complete without a few exceptions to the rules, and we encounter one such exception here.

Because the guttural 'A-yin is a weak letter, when 'A-yin is the last letter of a word and follows the "u" vowel, it needs a little help to be

Hebrew Nuggets

heard. The *pa-TAH* is added as a "helping vowel," and is pronounced before the 'A-yin rather than after it. This creates a syllable which begins with a vowel, one of the few such exceptions in the language.

Lesson Four: *pa-TAH* and 'A-yin

Jesus' Hebrew name is composed of three syllables: ye-SHU-a^c. In previous lessons of "Hebrew Nuggets" we discussed the vowel and consonant sounds of the first two syllables—the "y" sound of the yod, the tse-RE or "e" sound, the shin which is pronounced "sh," and the shu-RUK which sounds like a "u." In this lesson we will learn the two sounds of the final syllable.

The 'A-yin is almost inaudible to the western ear. Consequently, the name יֵשׁוּעַ almost sounds to the speaker of a European language as if it ends with the "a" sound. Many Israelis of oriental extraction—immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries—pronounce the 'A-yin sound properly. For most Israelis, however, 'A-yin is a silent letter.

The Hebrew Language Academy, guardian of the purity of the language, has ruled that the 'A-yin should be sounded, and Israeli radio and television announcers are required to pronounce it correctly.

An Ending Added

We noted in the previous lessons that the first four sounds in Jesus' name are mispronounced today by English speakers. As if to

avoid further problems, the fifth and sixth Hebrew sounds are not pronounced at all. That is because they were already dropped from the Greek transcription of the name—from which the English "Jesus" is derived.

The Greeks had no letter in their language which could represent the sound of the 'A-yin, and its helping vowel, the *pa-TAH*, seems to have been lost with it.

But where did the final "s" of the word "Jesus" come from? Masculine names in Greek ordinarily end with a consonant, usually with an "s" sound, and less frequently with an "n" or "r" sound. In

the case of the name Ἰησοῦς, the Greeks added a sigma, σ, the "s" sound, to close the word.

English speakers make one further change from the original pronunciation of Jesus' name. English places the accent on "Je," rather than on "sus." For this reason, the "u" has shortened in English to "uh."

Other Hebrew Words

Having introduced 'A-yin and *pa-TAH*, we have now learned all six sounds that form the name יֵשׁוּעַ. These Hebrew letters and vowel sounds are used in other words of the Hebrew language. יָשַׁע (YE-sha^c), for instance, is one of the many Hebrew words for "salvation," and is used five times in Scripture. The personal name שׁוּעַ (SHU-a^c) is attributed to the father-in-law of Judah mentioned in Genesis 38:2.

In Lesson Five we will continue our study of the Hebrew language by introducing a word which exhibits additional letters of the Hebrew alphabet—the word אָבָא (Abba), a Hebrew word borrowed from Aramaic.

Jesus' Use of "Amen"

Jerusalem scholar Robert Lindsey has written that Jesus used "amen" in a typically Hebraic way. Jesus always used it as a response, never as an adverb preceding a statement.

We focus in this article on one instance of Jesus' use of "amen" for which Dr. Lindsey has discovered an intriguing parallel in the book of Jeremiah.

As we saw in our previous article, Jesus seems always to have used "amen" in a way that is consistent with general Hebrew usage. Jesus used "amen" after a statement or event to emphasize its importance or affirm it.

Dr. Lindsey has suggested in his article, "Verily" or 'Amen — What Did Jesus Say?" (*Christian News from Israel*, Vol. XXV, No. 3), that "Amen! I say to you..." also may be a prophetic pattern of speech.

The book of Jeremiah recounts the story of the false prophet Hananiah who publicly prophesied in the Temple that in two years God would return King Jehoiachin, the other Judean exiles and the Temple vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away to Babylon.

The prophet Jeremiah made an emotional refutation of this prophecy: "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill what you have prophesied and bring back from Babylon the vessels of the LORD's Temple and all the exiles! However, listen to what I say in your ears and in the ears of all the people [in other words, to you and to all the people]..." (Jer. 28: 6-7), and Jeremiah went on to explain why Hananiah's prophecy was false.

In this context, Jeremiah's "Amen" means, "I wish you were right, but unfortunately you are not." In Luke 4:24, Jesus uses "amen" in a similarly ironical fashion. Jesus had come to Nazareth, where he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom."

He was given the scroll of Isaiah and read from it:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the humble, to proclaim liberty to the captives and sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim a year of the LORD's favor. (Isaiah 61:1,2; 58:6)

Bold Claim

In Jesus' day, Isaiah 61:1 was considered a messianic prophecy because of its use of the word מָשַׁח (*ma-SHAḥ*, "he has anointed") — which has the same root as the word מָשִׁיחַ (*ma-SHI-ah*, "Messiah"). It therefore was a bold claim when Jesus announced to his listeners that the prophecy had been "fulfilled today in your ears."

The crowd marvelled "at the words of grace which proceeded from his mouth," ("words of grace" can, in Hebrew, also mean "words of disgrace," that is, "words of heresy"), and scoffed, "This is, after all, just Joseph's son." To which Jesus replied, "You probably will quote me the parable, 'Physician, heal yourself. What we have heard you have been doing in Capernaum, do here too.'"

Then he said, "Amen! I say to you, no man is a prophet in his own town." He ended by suggesting that just as Elijah and Elisha worked miracles of healing and feeding for outsiders only, so his own miracles would be limited to the people outside Nazareth.

Close Parallels

As Dr. Lindsey has noted, the parallels seem too close to be accidental. Jeremiah spoke *in the ears* of the people; Jesus said the Scripture is fulfilled *in your ears*. Jeremiah said *amen* to a prophecy that he wished would come true but knew would not; Jesus said *amen* to a hope of the working of miracles in Nazareth, although he knew there would be no miracles because of the people's skepticism. Jeremiah countered the words of the false prophet with his own *I say to you*; Jesus countered the false demands of his townspeople with his own *I say to you*.

The ironic use of *amen* in both contexts suggests that Jesus deliberately adopted the pattern "Amen! I say to you..." from the speaking style of Jeremiah. As Dr. Lindsey has suggested, perhaps Jesus wished his listeners to understand that this way of speaking matched his prophetic calling and messianic claims.

According to Lindsey, the Greek word *amen* which appears repeatedly in the texts of the Gospels is a transliteration of the Hebrew word Jesus used as a response. It is untenable to contend that Jesus used "Amen" to mean "verily" or "truly." The "I say to you..." which invariably follows, seems to have been added by Jesus to introduce an additional, strengthening affirmation.

Better Knowledge

Many other Hebrew words and phrases are preserved in the Greek texts of the Gospels, and can offer a deeper insight into the teachings of Jesus. But without an acquaintance with the Hebrew language and culture of Jesus' day, these Hebraisms will remain unrecognized and may create misunderstandings.

A Hebraic perspective helps clear away much of this confusion, and provides a better knowledge of the historical Jesus who lived and taught in Israel some 2000 years ago.